

Overstrikes and Other Anomalies on Early Half Cents

R. Tettenhorst

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Introduction

Collectors looking at half cents are often puzzled by something unusual they see on a coin. They recognize that it is different from what they have seen on other coins of the same design, but wonder what it is or how it happens to be there.

Resolving these questions is important to collectors for two reasons. First, they are interesting intellectual puzzles, opportunities for increasing numismatic knowledge. Second, some of these lines or marks can greatly affect the importance of the coin. If it is just damage which exists, then the interest in it is decreased. But if it is a rare die state or unusual undertype, its significance may be substantial.

This paper will discuss these lines and marks on half cents in three broad categories, distinguished by whether they were created after, during, or before the striking process. Although Walter Breen's 1984 book, *Encyclopedia of United States Half Cents*, contains extremely comprehensive discussions of these kinds of half cents, bringing these sometimes puzzling coins together as a single topic may be helpful.

Marks Created After the Striking Process

The post-striking appearance, or for that matter, disappearance of marks on half cents can be further divided into two categories. Most of these marks reflect normal wear and other damage that occurs as a result of the coins circulating as money. Coins were made to be articles of use, and that use entails experiences, both gradual and sudden, which leave their record on the coin itself.

Generally, the nicks, scratches and pits on half cents are easily recognizable. They involve removal or displacement of metal, which can be readily noticed, although in some difficult cases high magnification may be required. However, even an experienced numismatist need not be embarrassed at being occasionally misled. Ebenezer Gilbert in 1916 published his thorough and careful work on half-cent varieties. Yet he mistakenly described an 1808 variety 3, which was actually his variety 2 after having accidentally experienced a bit of well-concealed damage. A bump, which left virtually no other trace, had displaced the highest wave of hair upward toward the R of LIBERTY. Gilbert's coin, which later found its way into the Brobston and Showers collections, is now in my possession. It is extraordinarily difficult to see that the changed posi-

tion of the hair wave is due to a bump rather than being a normal striking from a different die.

Of more concern to numismatists are the deliberately altered examples which occasionally appear, such as an 1834 half cent with the date altered so that it appears to be a rare 1831. Gilbert's other mistaken listing of a non-existent variety was of this kind. His 1795, no. 2 was described as having the same dies as the lettered edge no. 1, except with a plain edge. It was, in fact, a 1795, no. 1 which had had the edge deliberately filed or ground away to eliminate the incuse lettering.

Marks Arising During Striking

Marks created during the striking process can be further subdivided into marks which are in the dies and those which arise as a result of some event which occurred during the striking process:

A. Some well-known features of particular half-cent dies were created during the preparation of the die. Examples include:

1. The "comma" in the punctuated date of 1795.
2. The "1 over 1" on an obverse die of 1797.
3. The "inner circle" of an obverse die of 1809.
4. Traces of guide lines for the punching of letters on reverses of 1825 and 1826.
5. Overdates in general.
6. Various engravers' scratches, file marks, etc.
7. The missing pole of varieties of 1795, 1796, and 1797.
8. The missing stems on the wreath of a reverse used in 1804, 1805, and 1806.
9. The missing star in an 1828 obverse.

Normally, if a mark arose during the preparation of a die, it could be expected to show in every sufficiently unworn example of the coin. However, some marks are faint and do not show in lightly struck coins, or fade away as a die becomes worn through use. Conversely, even though every known 1796 no pole variety shows a prominent obverse horizontal line from a cracked die, it is assumed that uncracked specimens must have existed.

B. Other marks in dies arose as a result of injuries to the dies after they were placed in service. Examples include:

1. A shattered obverse die of 1797 (variety 1).
2. The spiked chin obverse of 1804.

3. The dramatically progressive breaking of a reverse die on 1804 (variety 6).
4. Major cuds at the stars on an obverse of 1811 (variety 1) and above LIBERTY on an 1826 obverse (variety 2) and an 1808 obverse (variety 2), among others.
5. Clash marks in general (particularly prominent in 1794 and 1833 pieces).
6. Die cracks and rim crumbling in many varieties, and raised dots from rusted dies in a few others.

C. A common example of a mark that arises as a result of the striking of the particular coin is a coin which has been struck two or more times. Usually enough of the early strike shows to make identification easy, but this is not always true. This category yields some interesting variations which can be quite different in appearance. For example:

1. A normal double strike with both obverse and reverse showing similar evidence of the two strikings. With respect to each other the two strikes may display a rotation, a linear shift, or both.
2. A coin may show similar evidence of three or more strikes.



2. Triple strike



3. Flip-over double strike

3. A flip-over double strike, in which the obverse shows traces of an earlier reverse strike, and vice-versa.
4. A triple strike in which a flip-over has occurred.

5. A half cent which was first created as a brockage and then restruck normally. Examples exist of both an off-center brockage and a normally centered one as the first strike. In fact, there are a considerable number of different possible orientations of the two planchets to each other and to the respective dies. Each possibility yields a somewhat different appearance. However, they can often be distinguished with study, even as undertypes, if sufficient detail remains.



5. Brockage

5. Off-center brockage



6. A half cent which was first struck with another blank planchet in the press at the same time, creating a uniface impression, and then restruck normally. In this case, one side is struck twice and the other only once. The singularly struck side is aligned with the second strike on the other side.

7. A coin which was first struck normally, but which remained in the press when a second planchet was fed in and another strike occurred. The second coin becomes a brockage. The first coin shows a clear double strike on one side, but only a single strike on the side which was in contact with the blank planchet during the second strike. The appearance of this coin is similar to that of (6) above. However, it differs in that this has the singularly struck side aligned with the first strike on the other side.

8. A normally struck coin which remained in the press as a second blank planchet was partly fed into the press. In this case, the first coin displays on one side a prominently depressed arc created by the rim of the new planchet during the second striking.



8. Second strike by blank planchet

9. A similarly created "tiddly-winks" coin, in which only a very small portion of the second planchet was projected over the first coin, and popped out as the second strike occurred.

10. Another variation, in which only a very small portion of the first coin remained in the press, and popped out during the second striking.

For some reason, these multiple strikes are found quite frequently in some varieties and are much less common in other varieties of the same year which are of equivalent rarity. It is a reasonable assumption that some malfunction of equipment or personnel persisted long enough before being corrected to produce a meaningful number of examples with multiple strikes. Varieties for which relatively large numbers of multiple strikes exist include: 1795, no. 6; 1797, no. 2; 1804, no. 10; 1804, no. 13; 1805, no. 1; 1806, no. 1; 1808, no. 3, 1809, no. 6.

In spite of the relatively good number of double-struck plain edge 1795 half cents which exist, no double-struck lettered edge 1795 has come to the writer's attention. Nor has a double-struck 1793 or 1794. It would be much appreciated if any reader who knows of one would share that information.

Moreover, double-struck half cents dated later than 1829 are also quite rare, except for those with a very small distance between the two striking, sometimes described as "double profile" or "die chatter."

Planchet Marks Created Before Striking

Another category covers identifiable devices or traces of another coin which was used to make a half-cent planchet. This is what is usually meant by the term "undertype." Two common undertypes exist on early half cents:

A. Talbot, Allum & Lee tokens dated 1794 and 1795 were purchased by the Mint in 1795 and 1796. These were used to make planchets for half cents dated 1795 and 1797, respectively.

The purchase of these tokens and their use to make half cents is well documented in the records of the Mint. Both Roger Cohen and Walter Breen have extensive discussions of this in their books. Traces of the original TA&L devices are commonly seen on 1795 and 1797 half cents. In some instances, there is a substantial amount of the original design visible, and at least one half cent exists where several of the edge letters of the token can be seen on the edge of the half cent.

B. Misstruck large cents were withdrawn and saved by the Mint instead of being melted and rolled into strips. Periodically these were cut in to half-cent planchets. Little care appears to have been taken to obliterate the traces of the large cents or to roll them to half-cent



A. Struck over Talbot, Allum & Lee token

planchet thickness.

The most common type of error which appears as an undertype is an off-center large cent. The arc of heavy denticles is a prominent feature of many such half cents. It can prevent a portion of the half-cent devices from being visible, even on an uncirculated specimen. This appears to the casual observer as a disfiguring defect. Strictly speaking, however, it is not damage. The finest known 1795, no. 5b, is an uncirculated specimen of this kind with a good deal of original mint red.

There are some half cents made from large-cent brockages. However, far more large-cent brockages exist in collectors' hands than do half cents made from rejected and retained brockages. Therefore, it would appear that the Mint as a rule must have considered such coins as acceptable for circulation. Exactly the opposite is true for off-center large cents, which are less frequently seen in collectors' hands than as undertypes for half cents.

In addition, one 1795, no. 5b, is known which shows a double clip of large-cent arc, indicating that the planchet was rejected for large cent use and cut down to make a half cent.

These spoiled large cents exist as undertypes for each half-cent date from 1795 to 1802. Several varieties appear to have been made exclusively from planchets cut from spoiled large cents. These are: 1795, no. 5b; 1795, no. 6b; 1797, no. 3 (all three subvarieties); 1802

(both varieties).

In some cases, enough of the large-cent detail is still visible to permit attribution of the variety. And in at least two instances the digits 98 of the large-cent date appear as part of the undertype on half cents dated 1797. This is clear confirmation that the dies were continued in use after the year of their date, which can also be deduced from the records of the Mint.



B. 1797 half cent struck on planchet cut from off-center 1798 large cent (S-164)

C. There are three 1795, no. 6 half cents struck on planchets made from copper trial strikings of half-dollar dies. Two of these, one of a 1794 (0-105) half dollar and the other of a 1795 (0-117) half dollar, have been listed for some time in editions of Judd's book on patterns. Another pair of 1794 half-dollar dies (0-104) comprise the



C. 1795 half cent struck on planchet cut from copper trial piece for 1794 half dollar (O-104)

undertype of the third half cent of this kind. It appears that these die trials were rolled down to half-cent thickness before half-cent planchets were cut from them, in contrast to what was done with spoiled large cents at about the same time.

D. A final reference to undertype is in the Brobston catalogue which makes the following statement as part of the text for the 1802, Reverse of 1800 half cent: "Practically all were struck on cut-down planchets of Large Cents, Mass. half cents and other coins." No record or reference to Massachusetts half cents or other coins as undertypes for half cents, other than the Brobston reference, is known to the writer. Neither Cohen or Breen mention knowing of any. I would be delighted to hear from anyone who knows of such references or coins.

Conclusion

Half cents are particularly rich in specimens which display unusual marks and details. Perhaps because the denomination was of such small value, it was used to salvage bits of copper. Little effort appears to have been made to remove traces of the planchets' prior devices. And dies were retained in use long after they had sustained considerable wear or damage.

These coins can challenge us to use more than the usual amounts of observation and analysis. And in return, they can reward us with additional knowledge, not only about themselves, but about the coinage techniques and practices of that early era.